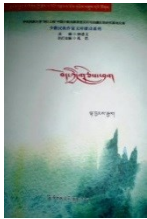


REVIEW: *THE BELOVED CHILDREN OF TIBET*  
BY LHA BYAMS RGYAL

Reviewed by Tshe dpal rgyal ཚེ་དཔལ་རྒྱལ། (Caihuajia 才华嘉 Qinghai Nationalities University 青海民族大学)



Lha byams rgyal ལྷ་བླ་མ་རྒྱལ། 2012. *Bod kyi gces phrug བོད་ཀྱི་གཅེས་ཕུག་གི་ཉི་མཱ་ཚེས་ཕུག་* [The Beloved Children of Tibet]. Pe cing བེ་ཅིང་།: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྱེད་ཁང། [Nationalities Press]. 366pp. ISBN 978-7-105-12243-1/I (paperback 24RMB).

Rinchenkar (2017) reviewed this novel in a well-written, detailed essay. I approach the novel somewhat differently. First, I translate the title as *The Beloved Children of Tibet* rather than *Tibet's Beloved Child*. I use the plural form because the four children, including the narrator, are all the main characters. Second, the style and structure of my essay differs in that I focus on key plots and elements. Third, I emphasize change in the context of education, modernity, tradition, marriage, displacement, nostalgia, and "returning home."

Lha byams rgyal<sup>1</sup> was born in the late 1970s in Khri ka County (Guide), Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. He received both BA and MA degrees from the Central Nationalities University in Beijing, and later he studied for a PhD with a focus on Tibetan Buddhism and culture at the Southwest Nationalities University in Chengdu. Working in the Department of Religious Studies at China's Tibetology Research Center, he is currently based in Beijing. While doing academic research, he writes poetry, essays, short stories, and novels. He has won the prestigious Sbrang char rtsom rig bya dga' (Light Rain Literature

<sup>†</sup>Tshe dpal rgyal (Caihuajia). 2019. Review: *The Beloved Children of Tibet* by Lha byams rgyal. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 58:521-531.

<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/2N6vzKd>, accessed 10 June 2019.

Award) four times and is recognized as one of the most talented writers currently writing in Tibetan. His published works include *Lam gyi nyi 'od 'Sunshine on the Road'*, a collection of short stories; *Lha byams rgyal gyi sgrung 'bring phyogs bsgrigs 'Lha byams rygal's Novella Collection'*; *Bod kyi gces phrug 'The Beloved Children of Tibet'*; *A mdo kha skad 'Colloquial Amdo Tibetan'*; and *Nag mo khol gyi snyan ngag dus tshigs kun bsdus bod 'gyur ma 'Tibetan Version of Nag mo khol's Poetry Compendium: Four Seasons'*.

Published by the Beijing Nationalities Press in 2010, *The Beloved Children of Tibet* is his first novel. Written in the first person, the novel portrays the narrator and his three friends growing up in a mountainous, agro-pastoral Tibetan village and their lives as adults.

The novel has two sections that engage tradition and modernity, a confrontation common in modern Tibetan literature, starting from the 1980s (Virtanen 2008). Part One describes the narrator's childhood and elementary school years in the village. Part Two features urban environments and feelings of loss, displacement, struggle, and a longing to return home. The juxtaposition of past and present, rural and urban, and old and new in the novel powerfully conveys a sense of nostalgia.

The novel opens with a detailed description of a snowy winter morning in quiet, isolated Mar nang drong. The narrator enters the story as a six-year-old boy, who joyfully runs about. By happenstance, he etches the first letter of the Tibetan alphabet with his footprints in the snow. His father happens to be standing on the roof of their house, notices, and praises his ability to write a letter from the Tibetan alphabet. The boy summons his three childhood friends, and they end up arguing about the letter. Their raw reactions to the letter symbolizes their attitudes toward education and suggest their eventual life paths.

Having never seen letters of the Tibetan alphabet, Gsal sgron assumes that a letter is a toy. She and the narrator become the first two children in the village to finish elementary school and go on to middle school and high school. Eventually, Gsal sgron fails the college entrance exam and flees to Lha sa to become a sex worker and operate a bar.

Looking at the letter, Nyi ma don 'grub, who is later recognized as an incarnate *bla ma*, asks, "How do you know it is a letter?" After a short time in school, he drops out and goes to a monastery. Afterward, he abandons the monkhood, goes to Lha sa, and becomes a wealthy businessman.

Thar phel, a belligerent boy, smudges the letter, leading to a fight with the narrator. Thar phel finishes elementary school, but his poor grades mean that he is not eligible to enter middle school, so he herds sheep in the village. Eventually, he becomes the village leader and is involved in a violent grassland dispute with a neighboring pastoral village.

Early in the reform years of the early 1980s when the main characters were children, the government began building schools in rural Tibetan areas to promote modern education. New ideas and modern products began trickling into communities, shaking up old systems of thought. When the characters reach school-age, a school is built in the village. They attend and learn how to read, write, and count. Moreover, they are exposed to modern ideas. Their teacher, 'Gyur med, is progressive, forward-thinking, and the first person to bring the outside world to these children. They are fascinated, for example, when they study a text cautioning children to look both ways when crossing a street and first encounter the term, *mi 'grul lam* 'crosswalk'. They are clueless but full of curiosity. One day when they are playing by the river in the village, an airplane flies overhead, leading them to discuss their futures. They want to be pilots, doctors, and teachers. Nyi ma don 'grub even wants to become somebody like Lenin.

School education is thus depicted as a vehicle of change and provides the sole opportunity to leave the local area. Gsal sgron and the narrator go on to attend middle school in town. Their teacher encourages them to study hard, see the world beyond the village, and lambasts parents who take children out of school to send them to a monastery.

School and monastery are sharply contrasted. Soon after the school is built, Mar nang dgon pa, the local monastery, is also restored. School is the place for new modern ideas, while the monastery is

steeped in old religious ideas. As institutions, they both rely on children to grow. Unschooled villagers are generally supportive of the monastery as a spiritual refuge in times of life crises, such as death. Time-honored tradition dictates that if a family has more than one son, one must go to the monastery. When Nyi ma don 'grub stops coming to school, their teacher takes all his students to bring the boy back. At the village center, they run into the boy and his mother en route to the monastery. The ensuing argument between the teacher and Nyi ma don 'grub's mother illustrates that school and monastic education do not go hand in hand.

Representing the two sides, the narrator receives a modern education, while his friend, Nyi ma don 'grub, is trained by monastics to be an incarnate *bla ma*. Eventually, the narrator finds employment in a city and settles there. In contrast, Nyi ma don 'grub leaves the monastery and becomes a rich businessman dealing in antiques that he has conned from the villagers.

Modernity and tradition are pivotal in the story, and the young teacher and the old storyteller are a well-balanced contrast. In the old days, children and adults gathered in the village, talking to each other and listening to stories. The gray-haired old storyteller not only provides Ge sar episodes but also does divination under urgent circumstances. For example, when Thar 'phel's little brother goes missing, the old storyteller blames it on a *mi la tsi tsi*.<sup>1</sup> The teacher silently shakes his head in disbelief at that explanation. After television reaches the village, people huddle around it. The old village storyteller and his narratives no longer entertain. Furthermore, children begin acting out TV dramas focused on the Japanese presence in China in the first half of the twentieth century.

Other symbols of modernity - radios, TVs, bicycles, and sewing machines - are introduced. As a better-off family in the village, the narrator's family is the first to have them, and this creates a stir. As a child, the narrator is particularly intrigued by the radio that sits on their family altar. He wants to know about the whereabouts of the

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<sup>1</sup> *Mi la tsi tsi* stories warn children not to go places alone. Skal bzang tshe brtan (2017) describes *mi la tsi tsi* as imps that trick and harm children.

speakers from the radio. His father, not knowing how to respond, likens them to deities.

Regarding the bike, the father does not know what to do with it, so he hangs it in the granary. A scene of the Pan chen bla ma on TV is particularly worth noting. The villagers, who have come to their home to watch TV, piously put their palms together in prayer and prostrate.

Reactions to these modern introductions illustrate confusion and uncertainty. Embracing modernity seems to create worry. Time is needed to adjust. Modernity and tradition do not necessarily clash because it is not a matter of choosing one over the other. For instance, people listen to traditional songs on the radio. The novel seems to support the idea that modern elements are useful while certain traditional elements are no longer relevant.

Arranged marriages illustrate challenges to old customs and beliefs. Despite the narrator's elder sister's protests, she is told to marry Gsal sgron's gold-toothed brother. Reciprocally, Gsal sgron is betrothed to the narrator, and a wedding is planned for when they reach the age of thirteen. In reality, the narrator's elder sister falls in love with the teacher. Their effort to evade traditional marriage fails when they elope and the girl's father and fiancé capture them.

The narrator uses "Sad kyis bcom pa'i me tog The Frost-bitten Flower," a well-known short story by Don grub rgyal (1953-1985),<sup>1</sup> to metaphorically describe his elder sister's fate. With schooling as an excuse, Gsal sgron manages to postpone and eventually escape her arranged marriage. Gsal sgron and the narrator's sister are well-chosen in the sense that one is educated and the other is not, suggesting that education emancipates girls from custom and tradition.

The author makes clear, too, that free love does not necessarily lead to a happy marriage, as the narrator's marriage to an urban Tibetan confirms. Constant conflict leads her to leave him. The narrator's wife grew up in the city with no knowledge of the Tibetan language, no sense of home, and little regard for Tibetan culture. None

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<sup>1</sup> For more on Don grub rgyal, see <https://bit.ly/2Y4wOy7> (accessed 19 July 2019).

of his family members attended his wedding in the city nor has he visited his father after he became bedridden. In the city, which he dreamed about as a child in the village, he does not find happiness. Instead, the city is covered in smog, as if it was a machine with no human feeling. In the city, he cannot find a sense of belonging, yet he is not ready to go home.<sup>1</sup>

The *bla ma*-turned-businessman is guilty because he betrayed his monastery and faithful followers. He is engaged in despicable acts, such as stealing the village school's old bell and selling it for a fortune.

Gsal sgron escapes the village and sells her body, a reality that tortures her. In short, these characters struggle with inner conflicts. As Nyi ma don 'grub puts it, "In reality, we all live wearing masks. Nobody knows who we truly are. Perhaps Buddha understands" (316).

In the essay *Phyir log mi thub pa'i mi*<sup>2</sup> 'Those Who Cannot Return', the author writes that Beijing is the present and the future, while home is the past, a distant place. The paradox is that in either place, he cannot find a sense of home.

Tibetans refer to home as *Gangs ljongs* 'the Land of Snow', and for those far from home, snow evokes strong nostalgia. The narrator's first recollection of the village begins with snow described in Part One. In Part Two, he sits in a city office, yearning for snow that would catapult him to his far-away home, a cradle of joy and happy memories. Nevertheless, he realizes that home is no longer what he imagines. It has been transformed by the rapid all-encompassing transformations sweeping the countryside (Virtanen 2008). The village is no longer simple, quiet, and untouched. Instead, TV antennas sprout throughout the village. Villagers no longer gather at the village center, basking in

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Jam dbyangs skyabs (2019:258) for a poignant, similar observation:

My friends admire me because I am living in a big city. They think the trees are green in winter, there are many fancy cars, and many huge, tall buildings. What they think is not wrong, but they don't imagine the terrible pollution. When I first came to Xi'an City, I thought it was a great place to live. I dreamed that one day, all my family would move to Xi'an City. After several months in Xi'an City, I thought very differently.

<sup>2</sup> <https://bit.ly/2N6vzKd>, accessed 15 June 2019.

the sun and sharing stories and gossip as children listen and play. There are now only young children and elders in the village. The others are away in urban centers earning money.

Perhaps the characters are not ready to return for fear of disappointment and of shattering their memories which were nestled in a childhood blissfully unaware of the pain and complexities of adult life. In the narrator's words, the feeling of longing for home is like a kite string tethered to the earth. In the city, he enjoys traditional Tibetan songs that remind him of home and tell him that no matter how far he goes or how long he is gone, he will eventually return. Finally, after hearing about bloodshed stemming from a violent grassland dispute between their village and the neighboring village, they all decide to visit home together.

Washul (2018) discusses urban development in China's Tibetan areas and why it lags behind that of other, rural non-coastal areas. In describing educated Tibetans moving from rural areas in search of employment and business opportunities:

The importance and changing meanings of "home" (Tibetan *yul*) for Tibetans who have been educated in the state system cannot be overlooked. But what it means to return home has shifted with their experience of moving through the spatial scales of the state's administrative hierarchy (494).

While for someone studying or working in Beijing, home is Mtsho sngon, in the novel, home refers to their natal village and returning home simply means returning to their birthplace. As Washul notes, a livelihood based on agricultural or pastoral labor is not desirable for those who have received state-sponsored education, and this holds true for the narrator, Gsal sgron, and Nyi ma don 'grub. Commenting on how the narrator's father became rich through raising sheep, Nyi ma don 'grub says, "That's the old way of becoming rich" (312).

## Washul comments:

Even the previous and current generations of farmers and nomads (the parents of educated Tibetan professionals and the siblings of professionals who did not complete school) view urban life, and the path to it via secular education, as a comfortable alternative to agricultural and pastoral lives that demand intensive labor and physical hardship (2018:506).

The narrator's father thinks differently. Before he passes away, he confides that it was a mistake to send his son away to school. He is unhappy that his only son has settled in the city and is no longer destined to inherit his property and continue traditional ways of life. In this novel, "home" is a particular topographical location and not a way of life. In contrast, Washul's excerpt (above) captures what most rural Tibetan parents believe.

In an interview,<sup>1</sup> the writer describes the novel as an attempt to capture simple rural life as he experienced it before the arrival of modernity and various outside influences. Now translated into Chinese, Japanese, and French, Lha byams rgyal states that he cares more about how Tibetans feel about his novel than he does about how many languages it has been translated into. He hopes that many years from now the novel's readers will be able to conjure a picture of what rural life once was.

The straightforward plot with adroitly intertwined subplots and well-developed characters strengthen the narrative. The language has a strong Amdo vernacular flavor, which may challenge some Tibetan readers, but it appealed to me. In terms of the narrative style, the writer uses his voice, adding to the story's believability.

This reviewer's life experiences resonate with the narrator's. Though memory is selective and often unreliable, *The Beloved Children of Tibet* provides readers insight into a vanished Tibetan way of life, imagined or experienced.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bit.ly/2O1VgMs>, accessed 15 June, 2019.

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TIBETAN TERMS

'gyur med འགྱུར་མེད།  
 'jam dbyangs skyabs འཇམ་དབྱངས་སྐྱུངས།  
 a mdo ཨ་མདོ།  
 a mdo kha skad ཨ་མདོ་ཁ་སྐད།  
 bla ma བླ་མ།  
 bod kyi gces phrug བོད་ཀྱི་གཅེས་ཕུག  
 don grub rgyal རོན་གྲུབ་རྒྱལ།  
 gangs ljongs གངས་ལྷོངས།  
 ge sar གེ་སར།  
 gsal sgron གསལ་སྒོན།  
 khri ka ཁྲི་ཀ།  
 lam gyi nyi 'od ལམ་གྱི་ཉི་འོད།  
 lha byams rgyal ལྷ་བྱམས་རྒྱལ།  
 lha byams rgyal gyi sgrung 'bring phyogs bsgrigs ལྷ་བྱམས་རྒྱལ་གྱི་སྒྲུང་འབྲིང་  
                                  ཕྱོགས་བསྒྲིགས།  
 lha sa ལྷ་ས།  
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྒོན།  
 mar nang grong མར་ནང་གྲོང་།  
 mar nang dgon pa མར་ནང་དགོན་པ།  
 mi 'grul lam མི་འགྲུལ་ལམ།  
 mi la tsi tsi མི་ལ་ཙི་ཙི།  
 nag mo khol gyi snyan ngag dus tshigs kun bsdus bod 'gyur ma ནག་  
                                  མོ་ཁོལ་གྱི་སྙན་ངག་དུས་ཆེགས་ཀྱན་བསྐྱུས་བོད་འགྱུར་མ།  
 nyi ma don 'grub ཉི་མ་དོན་འགྲུབ།  
 pan chen bla ma པན་ཆེན་བླ་མ།

sbrang char སྤང་ཆར།

sbrang char rtsom rig bya dga' སྤང་ཆར་རྩོམ་རིག་བྱ་དགའ་།

skal bzang tshe brtan སྐལ་བཟང་ཚེ་བརྟན།

thar 'phel ཐར་ཤེལ།

#### CHINESE TERMS

Beijing 北京

Chengdu 成都

Guide 贵德

Qinghai 青海

Xining 西宁